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A sceptic for our times?



Though one of the University's most prestigious alumni, David Hume was denied a Chair at Edinburgh as a result of his religious scepticism. Marking the tercentenary of the philosopher's birth, Professor David Fergusson examines whether the man really did reject faith.



David Fergusson

The tercentenary of the birth of David Hume (1711–76) provides an opportunity for an appraisal of the outstanding figure of the Scottish Enlightenment and one of the University's most distinguished alumni. In an age marked less than our own by rigid disciplinary boundaries and narrow specialism, Hume wrote as a philosopher, social scientist and historian. It is in the first of these fields that his reputation ranks highest – many today would regard him as the leading British philosopher.

Hume may be characterised as a sceptical naturalist. Rationalist justification of some of our most intuitively held beliefs – the independent world of physical objects, our conscious selves, other minds, the objectivity of moral and aesthetic values – is not achievable. These are subject to sceptical attack throughout his writings. At the same time, he argues, we find ourselves inescapably committed to believing in these, largely

through the force of 'custom and habit'. Understanding these natural processes gives us better insight into who we are and how we should live, although this results in a more deflated view of the world and our place in it than that attempted by the projects of other philosophers.

It is in the study of religion that Hume's scepticism has been most influential. The Enlightenment may have flourished on the soil of Scottish Presbyterianism – several of its leading figures being clergymen – but Hume provides sustained criticism of religious belief and practice. As a young man, Hume appears decisively to have rejected all brands of institutional Christianity. If at times concealed, his religious scepticism is prevalent in his writings.

The standard argument for God's existence in the 18th century was the design argument. It was claimed that evidence of order and harmony in the planetary motions, in organs such as the human eye, and in the adaptation of species to environment all signified intelligent design by God. In face of this,

Illustration: evvannave, fourth-year student, Edinburgh College of Art
www.evvannave.co.uk




Hume weakens the argument by a range of criticisms that ever since have set the terms of the debate. These are set out in his posthumous work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The appearance of design may be explained by other hypotheses, he argues, or perhaps there is no explanation at all, with the ancient Epicurean philosophy of chance remaining a possibility. Moreover, even if design is conceded, the designer may have attributes quite different from the God of classical Judeo-Christian theism. And, in any case, the world appears to contain many design flaws. Improvements can easily be conjectured, thus further diminishing the inference to a perfect deity.

In an essay on miracles, he argues that reports of these are never credible and ought always to be dismissed in favour of some alternative explanation. The weight of evidence required to give credence to a reported miracle will also be less than the probability attached to some other account of what really happened.


When dealing with the actual history of religious belief and practice, Hume

argues that this too is best explained in natural terms by a process of projection, of attributing agency to hidden causal processes and of seeking to promote our tribal identities through aggrandising local conceptions of the deity. In all this, Hume expresses a preference for the polytheism of the Graeco-Roman world. Its belief and practices are preferable, largely because they are harmless and more hospitable to virtues such as tolerance and generosity.

Was Hume an agnostic or an atheist? While there may be a residual commitment to the possibility of God at the end of *Dialogues*, it seems that this notion must remain distant and imprecise to human intellects. Moreover, it ought not to exercise any influence upon the way we live in society or understand ourselves. To this extent, Hume is practically an atheist and he appears to have lived (and died) quite cheerfully and without recourse to religious affections or sensibilities. The sense of God that animated other thinkers as different as Pascal, Hegel and Wittgenstein is largely absent from his writings.

In contrast to the tone of much of today's new atheist literature, Hume wrote calmly and in urbane mood. His writings bear the marks of lucidity and humour, while he succeeded in maintaining friendships with many of the leading moderate clergy of his day. Given that in 1745 he was refused a Chair in Edinburgh largely on account of clerical objections, this was no small achievement. The understanding of science, art, ethics, religion and consciousness may continue to generate fundamental disagreement, but the lasting significance of Hume's contribution to these debates is not in doubt. 

David Fergusson is Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh and author of *Faith and Its Critics: A Conversation* (Oxford University Press, 2009). As part of the University's Hume tercentenary celebrations, Professor Fergusson will present a lecture called 'Hume as Religious Sceptic' on Friday 30 September.

 Visit www.ed.ac.uk/about/video/lecture-series/hume/introduction for full details of the Hume-related events planned to mark the anniversary.